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PATTERNS OF LEARNING. COPING WITH SCHOOL FAILURE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN ADULTHOOD

Abstract. Participation in adult learning is unequally distributed in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. One of the targets of public policy is to raise and even the level of participation among different social groups. In the article we concentrate on adults already taking part in non-formal educational activities, however, their attitudes, ways of participation and benefits from education differ significantly. The analysis aims to explore and link the experiences of compulsory education with those of adult education. School failures and ways of coping with them seem to be of particular importance. We also analyse the context, especially in terms of family capital and parenting styles. We identified two distinct patterns concerning lifelong learning – cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, and present a few outliers. We argue that attitudes toward adult education and potential gains are determined by previous educational experiences within the school system.

Keywords: school failure, adult education, inequalities, lifelong learning, cultural capital.

WZORY NAUKI. RADZENIE SOBIE Z NIEPOWODZENIAMI SZKOLNYMI I ICH ZNACZENIE DLA PRAKTYK EDUKACYJNYCH W DOROSŁOŚCI

Abstrakt. Biorąc pod uwagę czynniki społeczno-demograficzne zjawisko uczestnictwa w edukacji dorosłych cechuje się dużym stopniem nierówności. Jednym z celów polityk publicznych jest zwiększenie poziomu udziału osób dorosłych w różnych formach edukacji oraz dostępności do

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uczenia się dla różnych grup społecznych. W artykule koncentrujemy się na grupie osób dorosłych uczących się w sposób pozaformalny, ale zwracamy także uwagę na różnice w ich postawach, sposobach uczenia się i korzyściach jakie osiągają z podejmowania aktywności edukacyjnej. Celem analiz jest uchwycenie znaczenia przeszłych doświadczeń, tych z okresu edukacji obowiązkowej, dla uczenia się w dorosłości. W szczególności niepowodzenia szkolne i sposoby radzenia sobie z nimi odgrywają tu dużą rolę. Analiza objęła także znaczenie kontekstu rodziny pochodzenia, w tym kapitału kulturowego oraz stylów rodzicielskich. Udało się nam zidentyfikować, znajdujące się na dwóch krańcach kontinuum, wzorce dotyczące uczenia się przez całe życie – wzorzec „skumulowanej przewagi" oraz wzorzec „skumulowanych niekorzyści", jak również odstępstwa od nich.

Słowa kluczowe: niepowodzenia szkolne, edukacja dorosłych, nierówności społeczne, uczenie się przez całe życie, kapitał kulturowy.

1. Introduction

Adult education is a topic of particular importance, especially in public policy, including policies on social cohesion as well as on developing social and human capital. It is also part of the concept of lifelong learning, which emphasises that learning itself is a process of individual development that takes place at all stages of life – from the cradle to the grave. According to UNESCO's report, the objectives of adult learning and education are: "to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies and to develop the capacity of individuals to think critically and to act with autonomy and a sense of responsibility" (UNESCO 2016: 10).

In comparative studies and analyses of the links between different determinants of adult learning, the focus is usually on socio-demographic factors, i.e., age, gender or labour market status (Boeren 2016; Guo 2010). What is lacking in analyses of the phenomenon is a theoretical framework explaining how previous school experiences and family of origin factors (cultural capital) shape involvement in learning activities at later stages of life.

In the paper, we argue that the learning process is located in the human biography and the socio-cultural environment. A learning trajectory is a process of constructing knowledge and building the resources and competencies for shaping adult learners' educational practices.

On one hand, we focus on capturing different approaches to coping with the educational failures experienced during initial education. On the other hand, we assume that this stage of one's biography is crucial not only for undertaking educational activities in adulthood but is also relevant for the course, dynamics and quality of this process. The main question we would like to answer concerns the links between experiences from initial and adult education.

We aim to delve deeper into the issues of coping with school failure by taking into account circumstances associated with the family of origin, i.e., cultural capital,

different parenting styles, and considering the importance of the school environment. However, the experience of failure per se is not a fundamental issue; instead, the main focus is on specific reactions, undertaken strategies, and the support received from the environment.

These issues were embedded in the biographical experiences of the respondents – adults, who had participated in courses, training and workshops during the 12 months preceding the interviews[1] (09–10.2021). We conducted 12 in-depth interviews[2] with people aged 25–64, diverse in terms of gender, educational background, and the social status of the family of origin. All the respondents recruited for the study resided in Warsaw. However, it is worth mentioning that the respondents' residential backgrounds during their childhood varied. Three of them originally lived in rural areas and moved to the capital city after completing their compulsory education.

During the interviews, we concentrated on selected stages of the respondents' educational path: primary school, educational choices and learning during adulthood.

2. The theoretical framework

In this paper, we focus primarily on the microstructural aspect of educational failure and its relevance to the educational biography of individuals. In the rich literature on the subject, especially in pedagogy and sociology, failure is considered in a multifaceted way, both in terms of causes, manifestations and consequences, as well as the opportunities to overcome them. Research on the phenomenon of school failure has been conducted in Poland since the 1960s by such researchers as J. Konopnicki, H. Radlińska, Z. Mysłakowski, C. Kupisiewicz and Z. Kwieciński. Similar studies were conducted abroad by sociologists of education, for example P. Bourdieu and B. Bernstein. They provided significant descriptive and explanatory knowledge on the nature, causes and consequences of this phenomenon (K o j s 1998: 15).

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[1] The study was conducted within the framework of the project: "Wspieranie funkcjonowania i doskonalenie ZSK na rzecz wykorzystania oferowanych w nim rozwiązań do realizacji celów strategii rozwoju kraju", nr POWR.02.13.00-00-0001/20, co-financed by EU within the framework of European Social Fund, realised by Institute of Educational Research in Warsaw

[2] The study is a part of a larger project focused on examining the determinants of adult education. It complements the analysis based on quantitative research, which explores the significance of family background and cultural reproduction for learning in adulthood (P e t e l e w i c z et al., 2023). However, in the quantitative research, the variable under investigation was the very fact of engaging in educational activities in adulthood. To further characterize learning activities and demonstrate how the level of cultural capital influences individuals' sense of empowerment and reflection when making educational decisions in adulthood, as well as their awareness of the potential to leverage acquired knowledge to improve their social status, we used a qualitative approach.

The definition of school failure proposed by W. Okoń emphasises that it is "a process in which discrepancies between educational goals and pupils' achievements appear and are perpetuated, as well as the formation of a negative attitude towards school requirements by young people" (Okoń 2004: 262). According to Kwieciński, school failure is a part of the exclusion system, comprising selection factors impacting school performance and educational choices (Kwieciński 2002). This emphasises the importance of social inequalities associated with the family of origin in succeeding and experiencing failure. However, the cited definition does not consider the aspect relating to the student's agency and the results he/she achieved. It can be supplemented with K. Czarnecki's proposal of perceiving failure in terms of the discrepancy between the effort a student puts into learning (self-assessment) and his/her school success as assessed by the teacher (Czarnecki 1998). Experiencing school failure is inevitable, "it always accompanies (in the consciousness of) learners, it is a 'constant unknown' occurring when undertaking and performing tasks that are new, difficult, numerous and especially when performed under difficult conditions" (Czarnecki 1998: 127). However, the adopted attitudes towards failure, implemented strategies, and outcomes seem to be crucial. We assume that coping with shortcomings can also be subject to structural determinants rooted in a socio-cultural context. Especially socio-cultural factors, like family, the school (teachers) or the peer group, as well as psychological factors, are important for dealing with setbacks at school.

Family attitudes, values and experiences influence the greater likelihood of a child's success in school (Dąbrowski, Żytko 2007; Fitzmaurice, Flynn, Hanafin 2021; Lareau 2000; Ball 2003; Yu, Liu, Guo 2022; Mikiewicz 2005; Dudzikowa, Wawrzyniak-Beszterda 2010). The educational success of children with higher levels of cultural capital is favoured by the fact that they integrate themselves better into the educational field (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990). How the student copes in this field depends on their disposition to perceive reality and their disposition to act (embodied capital), which in turn strongly relates to the socio-economic status of parents. In the model described by M. Kohli, the mainstream education system and "the qualification levels and profiles it defines determine the starting point, certain initial opportunities, and the direction in which an individual's life can then develop, and consequently also determine his or her social position" (Alheit 2011: 9). In general, qualifications acquired later do not create the possibility of correcting previous biographical choices (Alheit 2011). A school is a key place for practising formal learning, and by internalising specific educational content, individuals also learn certain methods of learning which are important for the next stages of one's biography.

3. Past learning – the importance of coping with school failure

During the interviews, the respondents were to reconstruct memories concerning school life, prevalent practices of learning, experiences of successes and problems in school, functioning in the peer group, and relationships with teachers and parents. Failure was not explicitly mentioned either in questions or in answers. However, during analysis they were distinguished. The discrepancies between the goals set by the school and teachers and the results achieved, as well as inconsistencies between the effort and the results, were categorized as failures.

Based on the analyses, certain patterns of experiencing shortcomings during compulsory education can be identified, as well as the strategies for coping with them. The most acute failures for the respondents were what we can call cumulative, successively accruing failures – from small problems with understanding the content of lessons and teachers' instructions, then obtaining bad grades, to the lack of promotion to the next grade, and in extreme cases – dropping out. Such a course of events is always related to the complex, multivariate set of triggers. It is worth mentioning that cumulative school failures happen not only to children with underprivileged backgrounds. However, for those interviewees, they had more profound consequences and often determined their further educational trajectory. Especially since problems at school were often accompanied by problems in the family, i.e., poor relationships with parents, domestic violence, and material deprivation. In the respondents' memories, parents' efforts were focused on providing for the family and securing basic needs. In terms of offspring education, they expected no more than a lack of problems and "passing from grade to grade". The mentioned descriptions can be characterized in terms of the authoritarian parenting style, in which the parents demand but do not support, where they expect problems to be overcome, but at the same time do not allow autonomy (Baumrind 1966). In the interviewees' memories, parents appear to be absent, alongside, not supporting their development, and at times demanding.

> The most important thing was to attend school, that there should be no complaints at the parent-teacher meeting… anyway, my mother was mainly interested in there not being any complaints, that there should be some sort of grades. (IDI_1)

It is characteristic that learning which is not supported in the family does not become an autotelic value for the respondents either. They had a very limited pool of options for coping with failure, both in terms of taking independent action and adopting an active approach. The spiral of school problems without experiencing success reinforces the "poverty of aspiration" phenomenon. In the respondents' stories, efforts to cope with the situation tended to focus on slipping through "from grade to grade", which amounts to adopting a strategy of "just to pass, just to finish school", but without making an effort.

> Sometimes it was possible to copy something from classmates, sometimes teachers "stretched the assessment". (IDI_8)

For these interviewees, the problem with meeting school expectations usually appeared already in the first stage of education, as a result of deficits in the initial resources obtained in the family, such as the possibility of forming language competencies or acquiring cultural codes recognised by the school. There is a lack of information in interviewees' stories about any support obtained in breaking the streak of failures either from parents or teachers. The former rather excluded them from the educational field, labelling them instead of offering help or positive encouragement.

An accumulation of school failures can also occur because of the discrepancy between effort and achievement. In one case we identified the difficulty of breaking the spiral of negative events, despite the efforts of the interviewee and support from parents or teachers. He did not experience the deprivation of basic needs and had positive experiences and role models from home relating to learning. The family of origin was characterised by high cultural capital, the parents were multi-dimensionally supportive of their son and provided opportunities to acquire experiences and competencies outside of school – numerous trips, spending time together and being surrounded by books. As he points out, an appropriate diagnosis of his problems was lacking and attempts to support him were ineffective, despite strong commitment, especially from his mother. Growing school anxiety led him to an accumulation of problems already in primary school, at first bad grades, then too many absences, lack of progress from one class to another, and finally the need to change the school. Escape strategies emerged in this situation – escape in the literal sense, such as truancy, or shying away from actively engaging in school activities and seeking a safety valve in the world of literary fiction or computers.

> The more I didn't go to that school, the more I skipped school, the more I fell behind academically. The more I fell behind in my studies, the greater the fear was. The greater the fear, the more I didn't go to school and .... it went round and round in circles like that. (IDI_12)

A recurring theme in the interviewee's recollections is the motif of being not understood, the failure to find the cause and providing systemic help and at the same time being "pushed out" by teachers to another class or another school.

> Well, those teachers just pushed me out of that school, really, somehow, they dragged me out of there by my ears with those D grades. I also got them to take pity on me and somehow... it was hard for them to keep me there until I was 20. (IDI_12)

Situations like this can lead to dissonance, on the one hand, identification with educational values, on the other the lack of results and dropout.

> I did very poorly in school, I didn't attend classes very much, I skipped school a lot and today, with hindsight, I know that it wasn't so much due to laziness, but simply to fear and this fear accompanied me for a very long time in my adult life. It wasn't until six years ago that I really

got over it. So that's how it can be with fear, we run away from certain things and my escape was skipping school at the beginning and well that didn't go very well, right? (IDI_12)

In all the narratives mentioned, the interviewees referred to multidimensionality and the accumulation of problems. Demanding situations were storing up and affecting each other, obstacles arise not only at school but also in other spheres of life; like relations with the family and peers, affecting self-perception and in extreme cases even prevalent anxiety. Lack of support and cumulative failures determined the further educational trajectory. This led to the perpetuation of a passive attitude – giving up and accepting the situation as it is or seeking a safety valve in the form of escape. The spiral of shortcomings in all these cases leads to the internalization of a negative image of the school as a whole – teachers, peers and the process of learning.

The situations described above represent the most obvious cases from the conducted interviews. Experiences of occasional but not severe failures were more common. They seem more like ordinary situations for the majority of students; deterioration of grades, problems with mastering the material from a particular subject, or the risk of getting an unsatisfactory grade at the end of the semester. They occur due to temporary neglect caused by focusing on other interests, problems with adaptation in secondary school, e.g., higher demands from teachers, the impact of the reference group or a family's problems. However, these failures were usually accompanied by experiencing successes in other areas of the educational field or other spheres of life.

The differences between these respondents emerge from the possibilities and ways of coping with school shortcomings. It seems that reactions to failure and the possible actions that could be taken are related not only to the family's cultural background but also to the attitude adopted by parents when faced with the emerging school problems of their children, in particular the level of granted autonomy.

The interviewees mentioned above come from families with relatively high cultural capital. According to reproduction theory, they acquired dispositions enabling them to function better in the educational field and adapt to the systemic expectations of school (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990). Usually, these interviewees identify themselves as good, above-average students.

The family attitudes and values reconstructed in the respondents' narratives refer to knowledge and learning as important determinants of educational success. However, the parents' expectations of what this path to success should look like seem to differ. From the attitude that knowledge is a value in itself, that regularity and independence are more important than grades, to focusing on good grades, praise from teachers, keeping neat notebooks and making the "right" choice of educational path (in line with the expectations of the social environment). It seems that these parental attitudes may shape different types of approaches to learning – learning based on freedom of choice, versus learning founded on doing what one is told and having a sense of obligation.

My mother pressured me a bit. I had the sort of mother who came and checked everything. You know, now in perspective, over time, I believe that this was very good because some parents were like not interested […] My father was especially nervous about such things… most likely I wouldn't have any vacation, I'd have to study and he'd be watching me the whole time. (IDI_10)

Not for grades. Knowledge is supposed to be knowledge and that's it. Sometimes it's that you know, well…. in these schools these grades are not directly proportional to the knowledge that the student has, whereas with me it was always the knowledge that mattered. (IDI_2)

Each of the interviewees experienced temporary turmoil during secondary education. Patterns of learning that worked well in primary school appeared to be no longer adequate. Usually, the failure was a consequence of higher expectations from teachers that interviewees were unable to meet, a change of peer group or difficulties in the adaptation process.

In primary school, I literally didn't have to do much, I didn't need to put in any kind of effort and those grades were somehow always very good. I mean I always did my homework nicely, but I never had any problems. (IDI_10)

Encountering setbacks led to the implementation of different strategies. In several narratives, modes of action familiar to primary school were undertaken, i.e., bending the rules to meet the expectations of teachers and parents, such as cheating or copying homework. We can also identify escape behaviours in these narratives: concentrating on those subjects where learning is satisfying and success is experienced, engaging in truancy, avoiding taking tests at the first deadline, or escaping into extracurricular activities.

I was always sick for the first test date because, for the make-up test, I would just take a folder because supposedly this helped me write more comfortably and I had these notes in that folder which my mom would still help me write. So... but I really liked biology and chemistry, for example, [...] there were even some competitions in chemistry and so on, so that's what I studied, and the things I didn't like were set aside. (IDI_7)

The respondents' recollections also show the different reactions of parents to emerging problems and failures. These reactions are part of the specific parenting styles – ranging from authoritative, through permissive, to an authoritarian style.

The authoritative style identified in the interviewees' stories is mainly characterised by the fact that the parents were supportive, but not overprotective. They did not do homework for children, giving them space so they could decide when and how to learn, as well as autonomy to pursue their own interests and extracurricular activities. In demanding situations, they looked for solutions together with their children – setting a plan or seeking external support in the form of tutoring. When confronted with minor problems, parents tend to expect independence in addressing them, rather than monitoring the effects and stepping in when there were inadequate results. An openness can be observed among the respondents

with regard to informing their parents about emerging problems. Recognition of the problems, seeking solutions and support from parents were factors preventing the accumulation of failure.

The situation differs when parents limited the child's autonomy. Some respondents recall that parents usually did the homework for them, contacted teachers and negotiated their grades with them, actively sought alternative opportunities (e.g., finding another school), and also involved their social capital or paid for tutoring.

In some cases, respondents recall that the parents' reaction to school failure was extremely negative and involved punishment for bad grades, disciplining and increased control. The level of autonomy was limited, parents also intervened in the choice of interests as well as in educational choices. In extreme cases, prohibitions included imposing restrictions on the ability to pursue one's interests and participation in extracurricular activities. It should be noted here, however, that this authoritarian style in the case of parents with higher cultural capital, unlike those lacking it, was associated with high educational aspirations for their children, and thus the expectation of success in the form of good grades, acceptance to the top schools, obtaining a higher education.

> No, they thought I shouldn't be involved in sport, they just.... you know, they lived through the war, those hard times, and they thought that.... how to put it, well I think it was because, you know, it was hard for them in life. (IDI_10)

From the collected narratives, we can identify specific patterns of coping with school failure. Particularly in the case of having a low socio-economic status combined with an authoritarian parenting style, there is an accumulation of school failures, experiencing failures that are difficult to cope with, a lack of opportunities and support, both from the family and the school environment and a lack of experiencing success. In the case of respondents from families with low or high levels of cultural capital, but with an authoritative, supportive parenting style and no accumulation of problems and failures, active coping and overcoming barriers can be identified. The level of autonomy granted to the child also seems relevant here, which usually accompanies an authoritative parenting style, but can sometimes also be a side-effect in the case of those respondents whose parents represented a neglectful style. In the case of respondents who were guaranteed a high level of autonomy, we can speak of the respondents adopting a proactive attitude (initiative-taking) towards school failure, which is also a role model in the family. It is characterised by accepting information about failure/reflection that leads to action, actively seeking help and support (talking openly about problems with people who can help, determining solutions together), setting goals (sometimes together with parents or teachers) and planning. In this situation, the experience of failure can be seen as a valuable lesson. It teaches perseverance in the face of barriers and setbacks, reflecting on the causes, being proactive, setting goals and putting the effort to cope with them.

Ultimately, these experiences, especially if accompanied by success in other fields and support from the social environment, can also contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, more autonomous educational choices in the future, and more autonomous ways of learning.

4. Learning as an adult

Empirical findings show that adult learning is most often undertaken in relation to work (Petelewicz et al. 2023; Czarnik et al. 2022). However, from the perspective of the individual, participation in educational activities has a much broader range of functions and benefits. As T. Schuler and D. Watson point out, "learning reinforces the power to take control of one's own life" (Schuler, Watson 2009: 7–15). It relates to various dimensions: cognitive, emotional and social; it helps to build social capital and open up new avenues of personal development and confidence (Illeris 2007).

Most of the interviewees undertook training directly related to work, although not solely concentrated in the professional sphere. While the link between work and educational activity is a unifying element for the participants of the interviews, learning is far from a homogeneous experience for them. Delving deeper into the narratives reveals that our interviewees' attitudes and perceptions of the process or its benefits differ significantly.

4.1. The practices of learning as an adult

For some of our interviewees, learning in adulthood seems to be a part of their lifestyles, and even daily routines. They view adult learning as an immanent part of a career, both in terms of developing and maintaining a professional position. Undertaking learning activities is treated naturally, interwoven with other activities in the field of professional work, often as a stage on the way to achieving a specific goal on the career path. Interestingly, in a few narratives, taking part in educational activities is perceived as a solution to various life problems, or simply to increase effectiveness in different areas. Such a high level of commitment and trust in learning as a means to draw closer to achieving a specific goal is combined with a good understanding of the various offers of adult learning and openness to participate in different forms – remote, on-site, webinars, forums, etc. The level of commitment and reflexivity is high, those interviewees see the wide range of gains that are associated with learning activity in adulthood.

> I'm constantly looking for myself, I don't know if I'm looking... I think it's worth developing myself and I'm looking for training, courses, webinars that are out there somewhere. I think those are the areas I should be developing in. I don't know, I think everyone should develop themselves, let's start with that, whereas I look for what's close to me or what I need at the time. [...]. I only

gave the last ones that I remember, which was one parenting workshop, on how to deal with difficult emotions in children. I can't quite remember the title because I was reading such a book at the same time, Difficult Emotions in Children, but generally that range, whereas in the last year, I've attended a few times different pieces of training, webinars about developing your financial intelligence in different ways. (IDI_4)

First of all... because I am... I get bored quite quickly and if I do something for too long, if I sit in a certain field for too long, I feel as if I were committing internal suicide, as if I were dying, well, I just feel bad and I need some stimuli for something to happen in my life, a positive one, it is worth mentioning because I can also find negative ones. And I simply need challenges, so for me, this training is first and foremost... by the way, I'm also planning a few other training courses, but they're not related to the construction sector at all, so... but we'll see how it goes. So, the main motivation was that I need these challenges and some novelty, the other thing is, as I've already encountered, describing all this technology, that there are really a lot of elements there that you can test yourself in. (IDI_12)

A high level of commitment manifests itself also in extending the practices of learning. Participation in training is just a part of the whole process, involving also self-learning and learning from the other participants, as well building information resources. Not less important is the development of social capital, establishing relationships, creating communities around certain topics, especially in the form of closed groups in the digital sphere and drawing on the know-how of the facilitators.

Yes, I mean now we are in constant contact, there is a closed group on Facebook but a pandemic has just broken out, well I called this guy and he helped me put together such a strategy on how to lower the price of the premises because I was paying 4 thousand for the premises, this girl didn't want to come down from the price, but he prepared me in such a way that I was paying a thousand zloty a month, so I was ahead by 3 thousand every month for a while. (IDI_7)

Active users of adult learning opportunities are becoming more proficient in navigating the field of adult education, they have competencies enabling them to select offers tailored to their needs. They have strategies for how to search for and check available options as far as methods, forms, themes and tools are concerned. Conscious users have certain expectations and are looking for high-quality learning opportunities. Participation in educational activity is treated as an investment with the expectation of a specific return. They are active in the process, and are characterised by a high degree of agency and determination, ready to subordinate professional or personal plans to the action, and even to take the risk of borrowing money to invest in a course.

We can also identify an attitude that can be characterized by a kind of withdrawal even when one is taking part in adult learning. This approach is common in cases where interviewees were engaged in a learning activity out of necessity. Learning in adulthood is not part of a deliberate strategy or positive choice, rather it is a requirement arising from the expectations of an institution, i.e., an employer or a job centre, and decision-making is limited. Learning something new, acquiring a skill or taking

part in an activity with the possibility of having one's skills validated in the form of a certificate, is seen as something that must be done due to external expectations.

> I: The initiative? Actually, together with the client, because we'd been doing such work in such a production hall for some time, and in the end the person responsible for OSH wanted us to take a course, which actually is required, so we decided that we had to do it, there was no way out, really.
> M: So, there are regulations so that...
> I: Well, if you use lifts... I mean, if you want to operate them, you should have taken a course, actually, you must. (IDI_6)

The approach is entirely pragmatic and geared towards obtaining the appropriate credential, motivation is derived from external requirements, so the educational activity is perceived as imposed and does not feel natural. The perception of training as an obligation implies the limitation of the selection process. The offer is often indicated by an external entity, in other cases the key criterion is accessibility – geographical proximity or the ease of taking it, the closest offer is accepted, imposed by the employer, or simply the one available "by happenstance".

The transmission of patterns from formal education can be identified, especially in terms of relationships with trainers, acceptance and even expectation of hierarchical order. There is a tendency to take on the passive role resembling traditional teacher-student relations, a lack of criticism and not asking even when the trainee does not know what the learning outcomes will be or what opportunities could result from completing the course or receiving certification. Sometimes it is even the case that trainees continue participation in educational activity even though it does not match the needs and initial competencies of the trainees. Moreover, as many educational activities are moving to the Internet, this form is chosen because of its greater accessibility, especially by those who have difficulty in travelling to stationary classes, e.g., due to the distance, lack of public transportation or family obligations. However, the effectiveness of distance learning is limited by low digital competencies and intimidation, compounded by the lack of direct contact with the trainer.

> Well, I'm glad I have the organiser's e-mail, but I don't use it, because I look for solutions on my own and there... well, because... gosh, if I were to write that I have a problem with it, it'll be stupid, it'll be in writing... and so if I ask, I'll already know and I'd click there and do it, otherwise I won't know. And that form of the questions, when you don't know something, to write it in an e-mail, I don't like it that much. I prefer to postpone it for a while, okay, maybe it will come to my mind, maybe something... and that's it. (IDI_9)

The educational system and later contacts with institutions (e.g., the labour market) biased the attitude towards learning organizations and the process itself. These factors contributed to withdrawal, a lack of criticism and agency. Adult learning is not treated as a market service with regard to which the provider is obliged to ensure certain quality, and where the participant is perceived as a fully-fledged customer who can ask or question the way the course is taught.

In the case of extrinsic motivation to the educational activity, engagement in the learning is limited – cognitively, emotionally and socially. It is not seen as an opportunity to establish social relationships and gain information about other educational or professional activities – building social capital – but as a necessary task to be completed. Consequently, the potential for wider impact is limited compared to those chosen more consciously and with a foundation based on intrinsic motivation.

5. Educational patterns – initial and adult education

The analysis shows that past experiences from compulsory education are also significant for participation in adult learning. Considering the trajectory of the respondents from the perspective of learning at different stages of life, we can speak of continuity. We can identify patterns that correspond with findings of structural sociology regarding the inheritance of inequalities, reproduction of the socio-economic status, and the accumulation of capitals, etc.

5.1. Cumulative disadvantage pattern

The most pronounced pattern in the narratives of our respondents is that of "cumulative disadvantage". Disadvantage starts as early as the stage of primary school; the lack of experience in coping with difficulties fosters a sense of alienation from the institution of school as well as the learning process. Exclusions caused by the low socioeconomic status of the family of origin and lack of competencies valued in the educational field are strengthened by a lack of support. This translates into withdrawal, escape behaviour and the enduring perception of school as an oppressive place where one has to be. Moreover, a characteristic of this pattern is a lack or limited activity and, at the same time, opportunities to accumulate positive experiences in extracurricular activities. Limited opportunities to make choices and to experience successes translate into a lack of self-efficacy, agency and subjectivity in educational processes in the future. Experiencing an accumulation of shortcomings and a sense of failure to meet the expectations of the school fosters the perpetuation of a sense of insecurity towards the educational institution, social actors, and learning processes. This translates into an approach to adult learning where educational activity is treated as a necessity. Learning is not embedded in the broader context of the interviewees' life. Patterns from compulsory education, in terms of the relationship with the teacher/trainer and the institution, and participation limited to fulfilling the basic requirements – attendance and passing, are reproduced in adult learning. The choice of opportunities and dispositions to undertake activities are limited. The question of the quality of the educational process, which was not investigated, also needs further exploration. It is particularly worth looking at vulnerable groups, who do not feel comfortable in their contacts with institutions, making critical judgements

or exercising their rights. In the case of one of our interviewees who took a course that should provide instruction on the operation of cleaning machines used in large facilities, the trainees were unable to gain practical experience due to the lack of available machines – only one vacuum cleaner was available.

Adult learning in this case is not a pathway, an opportunity to break patterns and limitations, it is part of a trajectory of reproduction. It does not open a new structure of possibilities to make a real impact on the situation of the participants; learning does not lead to empowerment.

5.2. Cumulative advantage pattern

School and learning are mostly associated with positive memories, especially from primary school, when a kind of base was formed – an attitude towards learning and school, the perception of oneself as a student with certain competencies, able to cope with the reality of school. Even when some occasional setbacks occur (usually in secondary school), they are overcome and resources are mobilised to develop coping strategies. These include the support of the social environment, the social capital and educational competencies embedded in the family of origin, but also one's resources to make up for certain shortcomings and plan remedial actions, and support from peers. In facing difficulties, due to an active attitude to overcome them, the interviewees build and perpetuate a sense of self-efficacy. That prevents creating a negative image of the school and learning or a breakdown of confidence in one's competencies. A characteristic feature of the educational environment of this group is the autonomy, the trust of their parents, and their subsequent consent to make choices and independent decisions in the educational area, regarding for example their further educational path or extracurricular activities. In adulthood, they are conscious, critical and reflective users of the educational process and have a high level of subjectivity – they do not carry over traditional patterns of subordination from compulsory education. They are characterised by a high level of commitment to learning resulting from intrinsic motivation. Learning is part of a lifestyle, and the knowledge and skills acquired are seen as beneficial and as a resource for solving both specific personal and professional problems. Furthermore, learning is a rewarding activity that fits in with building one's self-image.

This is a pattern that fits into the trajectory of cumulative advantage – the respondents come from families with relatively high (not low) cultural capital and each of them has at least a secondary education. They are usually active and involved in the selection and evaluation of educational offers. It should be underlined that the educational offers for them are more diverse and of higher quality. They use their accumulated capital (social, economic, intellectual) to select different options that meet their expectations and bring specific results, e.g., strengthening their professional position or increasing their economic competitiveness.

5.3. A miracle of the school system's case

It is worth highlighting one of the narratives – a female with a background of low cultural capital, whose life path, however, escapes the classic patterns of cultural reproduction. We can consider her case as an initial double disadvantage, due to her background – parents with a low position in terms of education, job and material status, and a territorial disadvantage. Living in a rural area limited her opportunities for development at an early stage of school and constituted a barrier to accessing educational services, extra-curricular activities and opportunities to develop her interests. However, due to her initial personal dispositions and exceptional cognitive abilities, she experienced many educational successes at school. She tried to be highly active as a student and engaged in various non-compulsory activities (as much as possible, as she was excluded due to the lack of available transportation). In the family home, due to her parents' professional situation, she had responsibilities beyond those which are standard for a teenager, including having to look after her siblings. At the same time, her parents were very trustful and guaranteed a high level of autonomy and built self-reliance. They believed that learning is a pathway to life change (a good professional and personal life). However, the respondent recalls this autonomy as overwhelming.

> No, I always had a lot of autonomy as far as my parents were concerned because my parents, in order to provide for all the children, had to work and very often I was left with my siblings. My brother used to call me mum because my parents weren't there very often, so it's so hard for me to say, but I was at home and I acted like a parent. My siblings and I were responsible for making sure the household chores and lessons were done, etc. (IDI_4)

In this particular case she got the opportunity to break the modal (typical) trajectory, (Bourdieu 2014) she was granted a scholarship and the possibility to continue her education in Warsaw. In adulthood, she treats learning as an effective way to change her life situation, solve personal problems and develop her professional career. She is a highly reflective and committed participant who also makes critical evaluations of the educational offer and has clear goals and expectations.

5.4. Limited advantage pattern

The attitude towards adult learning developed differently among people whose experience of compulsory education was good, but whose self-efficacy and influence on the strategies taken in the face of setbacks was limited. The interviewees had a good start in primary school, their parents expected them to have good grades and focused their attention on this aspect. In the face of unsatisfactory results, they responded and took the initiative. Even though we can point to the vastly different nature of the undertaken actions, from overprotectiveness to repressiveness, interestingly the consequences for their offspring were similar. In the interventions

of the parents, there was no place for including their children's voices and letting them choose coping strategies. The child had to accept the imposed solutions, and subsequently the limitation of their sense of subjectivity and self-efficacy.

Those interviewees do not feel confident in the process of institutionalised learning and take it up only in specific circumstances, rather because of particular, professional needs. They do not pay much attention to the selection of the educational offer and take one that is most accessible. The traditional teacher-student relationship is accepted and they are neither reflexive nor critical towards the undertaken activity, taking things as it goes. At the same time, they value the role of knowledge in their professional and personal lives, although in a more pragmatic dimension than in the group mentioned above.

5.5. Outliers

It is also interesting to look at situations that differ from the outlined patterns. The reverse of the *"miracle of the school-system case"* mentioned earlier is one of the interviewees who also experienced social and territorial disadvantage during her childhood and adolescence. However, these stories differ in their initial individual dispositions, in the opportunities afforded to them by educational advancement and in the way they participated in learning activities in adulthood. In both cases, we can also notice the differences in parenting and the level of autonomy guaranteed by their parents. The period in which the respondents' attended compulsory education is also a key – the 1990s in the first case, and from the mid-1970s and 1980s in the second one.

The educational effort the interviewee made was often inadequate to the expectations of the school system. It was usually difficult for her to prioritise what to focus on and how to learn. During compulsory education she was easily discouraged, after one minor setback she lacked the motivation to try again. She refers to her learning as "taking the easy way out." Her parents did not have educational aspirations for her and her siblings, they rather expected her to follow their life path. This attitude was, in her case, a barrier to shaping her educational trajectory according to her interests.

Regardless of familial habitus, she internalised the notion that education is an opportunity for social mobility and a better life. This biography however exemplifies an exceedingly long road to achieving educational advancement. The school system did not guarantee her support but rather tried to force her into a modal trajectory in line with her social background. She recalled an experience from the end of primary school when her class teacher chose each pupil's future educational direction. In her case it was suggested that she should continue her education at a vocational tailoring school.

Her path to higher education – non-linear and requiring input of effort – has not translated however into benefits in terms of social status or the stabilisation of her

economic and professional situation. Despite this, the interviewee is continuing her attempts at educational activities in adulthood, believing that learning will open up new prospects for her in the labour market and personal life. It seems that adult learning is undertaken as a certain escape strategy or an attempt to change her life, but with no faith that this will translate into professional change.

In her case, learning activities seem to give her a peaceful feeling that she did not rest on her laurels, rather than facilitate the creation of a particular plan for the future. One of the problems seems to be the lack of initial dispositions which allow her to efficiently convert achieved knowledge and skills gained through learning into a higher professional position. The respondent shares her fears and uncertainty about whether she will ever be able to find a job in the field she decided to train for, but she keeps continuing her course, even though each additional month comes at a cost.

Another example of an outlier is, already mentioned, an interviewee coming from a high cultural capital family, who experienced an accumulation of failure during compulsory education. The respondent's recollected primary and secondary school experiences correspond to the characteristics of school phobia, which led him to an extreme dislike of school feeding practices and educational institutions themselves.

He is very reflective, he recalls the period of compulsory education in his life as ineffective and is highly critical of the educational system. Nevertheless, in adulthood, he actively searches for ways to acquire knowledge and competencies that are relevant to his needs and professional field. He consciously chooses educational offers and is ready to invest resources in them. He has internalised the values associated with acquiring and having knowledge. He has numerous educational activities planned, including those outside his professional field – he talks about the courses of his "dreams". Adult learning gives him satisfaction, and he emphasises that teaching methods other than those he used to know from school allow him to break down barriers and build confidence in his competencies.

6. Discussion

Nowadays, the three-phase model of life – preparing for life, being actively engaged in life, and the period of retirement – has lost its relevance. The importance of upgrading knowledge and skills throughout life to keep up with changes is beyond question, and the impact on the well-being of an individual is well-documented in the literature (Alheit 2011: 10). However, the impact of formal education on the life course is still significant, shaping opportunity in the labour market to a great extent. Education shapes the typical structures of the life course and exerts a decisive influence on people's plans and experiences in life. Inequalities in education (compulsory, higher and adult) are still a big topic in social research

and social policy. As Desjardin et al. (2006) point out, almost no country is truly able to reduce social inequalities through adult learning. The disproportion between the share of high and low educated in terms of accessing adult education is part of broader patterns of social inequality (Ioannidou, Desjardins 2020; Schoon, Melis 2020). In the area of adult learning it can be interpreted in the context of the Matthew effect. People coming from families with higher status have a higher level of education, occupy higher professional positions and are more educationally active, which, in turn, strengthens their privileged position. Analysis in the area of social indicators and quantitative studies are based on the level of participation and show the structural determinants of access to adult education. The analysis presented in the article shows, however, that the very fact of participation is only part of a bigger picture: inequalities run much deeper. The quality of the educational offer, the benefits, and the way of participation are diversified and contribute to the petrification of social distances. As Beoren (2017: 165) states:

> While adult lifelong learning can be seen as a means to climb the social ladder and to advance one's life chances [the author is referring to social mobility discussions], reality demonstrates [that] this idea has failed. Lifelong learning participation mainly serves those who can use it to stack up cumulative advantages and not the ones who can use it to compensate for missed life chances.

Dispositions and approaches acquired during earlier stages of life, in different contexts – such as the family of origin and formal education – determine the benefits one can get from learning in adulthood. The attitudes, motivation and self-confidence of adults taking part in education are rooted in their past experiences. The way one can get along in the educational field, as well as complex situations and factors inherent in the family of origin, are important, such as: particular patterns, attitudes from the family home, parenting styles and, especially, the level of autonomy. Reconstruction of educational paths and experiences, especially of school failures and ways of coping with them, lets us identify particular patterns connecting compulsory and adult education. The most distinctive are: cumulative disadvantage and cumulative advantage (Kilpi-Jakonen et al. 2015).

With the former, the disadvantage starts already in primary school. Underachievement and various aspects of exclusion in the educational field, accompanied by lack of support from parents or teachers, and failure with no experiences of overcoming it, lead to alienation and distancing from the process of learning and educational institutions. This attitude continues into adulthood, despite the attempts to participate in different forms of training. Representatives of these patterns have a sense of inferiority in their relationship with instructors and tend to engage in educational activities out of necessity. The educational activity is seen as being imposed and decision-making and agency are limited. Adult learning has the potential for emancipation, social development, professional development, etc. However, participants who had negative experiences from the period of formal

education, who had experienced an accumulation of failures and the absence of support, do not perceive learning as one of the ways to solve problems. The offer that is available for them is low quality and their participation in learning does not translate into significant changes in their life, neither in their well-being nor in the professional area.

The pattern of cumulative advantage relates to positive experiences from compulsory education and active and fruitful participation in adult education. The most active and confident users of educational activities in adulthood had much more positive experiences from primary school and secondary school, even though they faced some failures, at the same time, they had resources and possibilities to cope with them. The support of parents, as well as the autonomy granted to children should be underlined. As adult learners they are reflective, active agents of the educational activities, starting from selection, through the entire process, until taking advantage in terms of professional and personal development.

However, it was also possible to identify patterns that go beyond these schemas. It seems that certain parental styles intervene in creating an approach to learning, especially in terms of agency. The analysis shows that the level of autonomy that parents granted their children when they experienced school problems and failures is of particular importance. Interviewees who did not experience the freedom to make educational decisions, to cope with school problems, are uncertain and passive in their relationship with institutionalised learning in adulthood. Learning is undertaken point-by-point, and they are also less critical and reflexive.

The significance of a rural background for an individual's educational trajectory appears to be an important issue. In our three cases, we observed that living in rural areas limited the respondents' access to diverse opportunities for developing their interests during childhood. However, further exploration is needed to analyse the combined influence of place and time on adult education.

Educational patterns play a significant role not only during childhood and adolescence but also have an impact on learning in adulthood. The way of participating in education later in life and its benefits are determined by former experiences, so adult education cannot be treated as the universal remedy that equally supports every social group. It constitutes an educational field resembling to some extent the field of compulsory education, where individuals/groups having particular dispositions, competencies and resources navigate better or worse. Adult learning can be a tool for empowerment also for vulnerable groups, but the process of learning usually requires using different methods and mechanisms and should be adequately supported. Few empowerment mechanisms emerged in literature: "empowerment through participation as a self-value, empowerment through the reconstruction of past experiences, empowerment through the strengthening of their social capital and empowerment through literacy skill" (Papaioannou, Gravani 2018: 1), which can be implemented. Initial dispositions and attitudes towards learning should be considered while creating solutions and mechanisms

supporting adult education. The concept of transformative learning, where through critical reflection, one can come to identify, assess, and possibly, reformulate key assumptions on which one's perspective is constructed, is one of the approaches to be considered (Kloubert 2020; Christie et al. 2015).

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